

## Against the Grain

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# "Managing the Big Deal"

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## The Big Deal at Michigan State University from page 26

- Familiarity with bundled content concepts that can extend beyond journals to cover eBooks, streaming video, and streaming music.
- Unlimited simultaneous user access which serves our large campus population.
- Remote access which serves our distance education programs.
- Opportunities for cost-per-use analysis through COUNTER statistics.
- Reduced demand for stack shelf space, opening up room for new library services.

As a research library, **MSU** prefers to collect with an eye to long-term ownership. The mix of “owned” and “rented” content in the Big Deal varies from that ideal: should we break some of these deals, we could lose access to content that came in via the top-up fee. However, limits on resources (not only acquisitions dollars but also building space and staff time) increasingly push us toward strategies that help us meet as many needs as we can, with the resources we have. We no longer expect that we can guess all of the resources that library users will want (so that we can buy those materials in advance), and we no longer expect that when we do pay for materials in advance, that library users will use every resource.

The Big Deal model with its mix of long-term ownership and conditional rented access complements other library strategies that move away from traditional expectations about what we own and how we own it:

- Consortial sharing is a step toward cooperative collection building, in which ILL fills a substantial role. **MSU** has ILL lending agreements across the CIC and also in our state through the MeLCat system. As a rule of thumb, academic libraries have seen that perhaps half of monograph selections go unread (just as we now see that some portion of Big Deal content goes unread). When in doubt, it now makes sense to wait before we buy some titles, since we can borrow many books from other libraries ... and in return, we lend widely.
- For eBooks, ILL is difficult or impossible, but eBook packages can offer a lot of titles at reasonable cost. **MSU** has both frontlist Big Deal agreements with major publishers, and also aggregated rental packages from **ebrary** and **EBSCO**. Once again, we understand that some content will go unread, and that we will not own some content forever.

- **MSU** also rents aggregations of periodical articles, such as **EBSCO** Business Source and **ProQuest** Academic Complete. While some content goes unread and content is not owned, pricing and convenience justify offering these tools.
- Finally, **MSU** has a few PDA/DDA plans (mainly for films at this time): some lead to ownership, some to rental access, and all begin with lists of titles in excess of what will be used or paid for.

While these concepts and approaches are not quite the same as Big Deals for journals, all of these models break out of the traditional model of title-by-title selection by library staff, in pursuit of other efficiencies that can reconcile user access with budget realities.

### Conclusion

If **MSU** had limited academic programs, gaps in the science curriculum, a reduced emphasis on current research findings, or an uneven materials budget for the library, the Big Deal model would be far less congenial. Rising journal costs, particularly in the sciences, challenge the library budget and force us to prioritize our selections. Given conditions on our campus, however, Big Deals have been part of an array of strategies to stretch available budget dollars.

### Further Reading

**Theodore C. Bergstrom, Paul N. Courant, R. Preston McAfee, and Michael A. Williams.** “Evaluating Big Deal Journal Bundles,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (2014).

**Stephen Bosch and Kittie Henderson.** “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On: Periodicals Price Survey 2015.” *Library Journal* 140/7 (2015): 30+.

**Walt Crawford.** “Big-Deal Serial Purchasing: Tracking the Damage,” *Library Technology Reports* 50/4 (2014).

**Kenneth Frazier.** “The Librarians’ Dilemma: Contemplating the Costs of the ‘Big Deal,’” *D-Lib Magazine* 7/3 (2001).

**Karla L. Strieb and Julia C. Blixrud.** “Unwrapping the Bundle: An Examination of Research Libraries and the ‘Big Deal,’” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 14/4 (2014): 587-615. 🐾

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## “Managing The Big Deal”

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A recent query for “big deal” in a library science indexing database provided 109 hits, dating back to 1987. Not all of these articles related to what we as librarians think of when we hear that phrase. In fact, it’s striking that not very long ago, those two words put together did not mean something controversial and they were not always capitalized. When did the Big Deal become a big deal?

Coined in the early 2000s, it was originally used to describe an emerging acquisition model in which publishers offered aggregated collections of online journals for one price, through a multiyear contract with a fixed price increase. The impact of acquiring journal content in this fashion has been studied and reported on

at conferences ever since, and continues to be discussed in this issue of *ATG*. The actual implementation of a Big Deal acquisition and the ongoing management of it often seems to be forgotten in these discussions.

Any time libraries buy or lease something in bulk, it requires translation into the infrastructure that we use to manage our library collection. This includes our integrated library system (ILS) and our discovery systems, and any type of knowledge base that includes the holdings information for the journals in a deal. There is a significant amount of staff time and resources involved with these efforts, not only for the initial acquisition, but for the ongoing management of this bundled content. Does this management represent a hidden cost that

isn’t taken into consideration when we talk about costs of the Big Deal? What happens to the Big Deal once the ink on the license agreement is dry?

### The Secret Life of The Big Deal

All libraries have some system for managing their print and their electronic resources, either through an ILS or some type of electronic resource management system (ERMS) or even a highly sophisticated, homegrown set of spreadsheets. All of these systems try to implement in some way the functional requirements of acquiring and managing electronic resources, initially defined and laid out by the Electronic Resources Management

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Initiative (ERMI) of the **Digital Library Federation (DLF)** back in 2004. Specifically, Appendix A of ERMI lays out functional requirements for an ERMS, which includes general requirements (resource discovery, bibliographic management, access management), and staff requirements (interface, selection and evaluation, resource administration and management, business). Some of these functions are harder with Big Deal content packages, simply because the systems built upon these requirements are geared toward an individual e-journal or e-resource, while publishers are increasingly offering content in bulk and as larger units or entities.

For libraries, tracking what we have when things are sold in bulk can be a challenge. Libraries are still required to track things at a more granular level, either for administrative reasons, or because the ILS requires this information, or because we have to provide lists of what we actually have access to in order to make the resources available and understandable to users who are looking for them. No one searches for **Springer** Core Collection or **Wiley** Journals Database. It often seems that the expectation for the unit of discovery is getting smaller, from a journal to an article to datasets or charts within articles, while the unit of sale for content continues to grow.

Some example acquisition challenges for the Big Deal include getting itemized invoices either from the publisher, or a subscription agent if one cannot be provided by the publisher, and translating this into individual bibliographic records in the ILS (so we know what we have) and then attaching the appropriate order records to them (so we know what we pay for it). This is usually followed by charging titles to multiple, disciplinary-specific funds, and calculating the individual cost for those titles from the total package cost, while accounting for any additional amounts charged by a subscription agent as well as the yearly project percentage increase so that fund is increased appropriately for the next fiscal year.

Activation of a Big Deal journal package can be problematic because again, while it is a package entity on the publisher side, the library has to make discoverable the individual journal titles included in it, sometimes without a title list or one that is provided by a subscription agent or on a website, or sent by the vendor if the vendor is able to provide that. Then, someone has to translate the journal package entity into the appropriate access points in the library discovery infrastructure — *"Is there a matching target in SFX, our link resolver? Is there a collection in Primo Central Index for this publisher which matches my package titles? If there is not a target, or the collection in PCI isn't representative of the titles in my package, how much customization do I do?"*

While this process would happen even for an individual title, the process for the Big Deal is more complicated because it is not really being sold or necessarily supported at the

granular level that is often required by libraries to meet their own administrative and technical needs for that content. Library staff have to work around this to translate this big lump of content into their systems and then they need to also interpret it for other library staff members through meaningful reports and data.

There are also challenges with the ongoing management of Big Deal journal packages. Tracking titles and title reconciliation during the term of a multiyear agreement takes a great deal of staff time and energy. Even though the library signs a multiyear agreement for a Big Deal, titles included in it are not fixed or guaranteed to always be included for the whole term of the agreement. Individual titles may leave the deal and go to another publisher; similarly, titles may transfer from another publisher into the Big Deal because of publishers acquiring them. Titles transferring into and out of these deals usually requires human intervention in terms of tracking the title movement against our options in license agreements, managing and updating their various access points in our link resolvers and catalogs, and adjusting funding if a library has to take on new titles to its deal. Even if the agreement has a limit on how much the value of the overall deal can fluctuate from year to year, the onus is generally on the library to track this. If a highly-used, higher-priced title transfers out of the deal, libraries may lose the price cap benefits of the deal for that title and still have to subscribe to the title from the new publisher because it is a core title for a particular discipline.

Another thing to understand is that a Big Deal license agreement may not necessarily be a stand-alone thing. The library's participation in it may have an impact on other content they choose to buy from the publisher. Perhaps the library gets a discount on an ebook package purchase because of its participation in the Big Deal. This participation guarantees no access fee as long as the library subscribes to it. How do libraries who are considering a cancellation or non-renewal of a Big Deal remember the impact of this on other content that is associated with it?

### Less Control, More Responsibility?

Perhaps all of this seems like small potatoes, compared to the larger issues related to the Big Deal. Still, the amount of time that libraries have to spend "in the weeds" with these types of acquisitions takes a toll. More and more time is spent keeping up with management and communication about the management of this content and even supporting it — which is usually how we find out the access dates for a journal have changed or are incorrect — than actually evaluating if it is meeting our needs. If libraries have to constantly do this translation, breaking down a larger unit of acquisition into its meaningful, discoverable parts, they are in a sense taking on greater responsibility for

managing content that they don't really own or control. (Even with perpetual access rights, the burden falls to us to track which titles are included and which years we have subscribed to and if these rights are retained if the title transfers to another publisher.)

While none of these things is a dealbreaker on its own, it is good for libraries to realize the actual behind-the-scenes work of managing these types of acquisition models that require this translation or interpretation, especially since much of this work is done by library staff who are the only ones who really understand how the systems work. It can take longer than people realize to fully implement an acquisition model like the Big Deal, or even the new evidenced-based acquisition models. For example, a DDA model may need to have a deduping process put in place; the library may purchase an ebook package and have immediate access on the publisher site, but the loading of the MARC records happens months later; an invoice for a large journal package may have to be itemized from a lump sum to individual title prices to be able to process payment for it. All of these things add up, in

terms of staff time, and even access and discovery time (and this is crucial for any library that has undertaken an EBA pilot which has a set access period.)

Both libraries and publishers can work on making the implementation of Big Deal acquisition go more smoothly, in part by realizing the level of detail required, but also by providing solutions to the

title-level tracking problem. A good example of something the publisher can do that makes electronic resource librarians smile is the creation and maintenance of Big Deal holdings in a specific target or collection within a knowledge base. (It was a good day at the **Hesburgh Libraries** when the new **Wiley** Journals Database target appeared in SFX.) Libraries can also rethink the way their funding is distributed and how narrowly funds have to be tracked. Taking subject-specific funds and creating a larger, more multidisciplinary fund helps staff immensely, but it also requires an acknowledgement that moving from a specific subject fund to a more general fund could affect reporting that is done out of the ILS. Subscription agents and services such as TRANSFER also provide support for this translation of invoices into title-by-title pricing and the movement of journals between publishers throughout the year. All of these efforts need to be based on a mutual understanding of the way libraries need to make information available and how publishers are vending and supporting it. 🐻

